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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a brief outline of current Canadian research contributing to the understanding of quality in early child care and education, and highlights, as a means of demonstrating elements of high quality, a range of early childhood care and education programs, policies, and practices offered in Canada. Three separate components of Canadian practice are described: (1) the comprehensive new family policy in Quebec, which increases the accessibility of child care; (2) the provision of multi-age groupings that include infants and toddlers in Ontario; and (3) the creation of a Family Development Centre in downtown Toronto designed to meet the diverse needs of parents and children. The paper notes that all three of these components reveal a research-based approach to ensuring that the concepts of quality are evolving. (Author/EV)

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MOVING BEYOND OUR ASSUMPTIONS OF EDUCATION AND LEARNING: A NEW ROLE FOR FAMILIES, SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES.

ACEI 2000 Annual International Conference and Exhibition

April 17-20 Baltimore, Maryland

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Title: Quality: Canadian Style

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This paper offers a brief outline of current Canadian research contributing to the understanding of quality in early child care and education and highlights a range of early childhood care and education programmes, policies and practices offered in Canada as a means of demonstrating elements of high quality. Three separate components of Canadian practice will be highlighted: the comprehensive new family policy in Quebec that increases the accessibility of child care, the provision of multi-age groupings that include infants and toddlers in Ontario, and the creation of a Family Development Centre that is designed to meet the diverse needs of parents and children in down town Toronto. These are three easily observable components of provision that reflect Canadian understandings about high quality practice. Each are based on Canadian research and incorporate the prevailing values of their context.

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Context

As a country of ten provinces and three territories, positioned on a significant land mass and a spread-out and growing population of over 30 million diverse people, Canada has a challenge to define itself cohesively. Its socio-economic mix, three levels of government, a degree of aboriginal self-government, climate variations, differing community needs and a range of cultural values also compound its complexity. However, in this blend there is strength as well as challenge. Strength can be seen in communities finding ways of meeting their own needs by drawing on the skills and resources available to them. With some degree of autonomy and political will, social initiatives can spring from the local, as well as the Federal level. The challenge lies in ensuring that there is shared responsibility for care and education and the research that must precede it. Within Canada, there is no single

model of early care and education that meets the needs of everyone; this has been a hurdle for researchers and practitioners alike. Swedish, American and other international research has assisted Canadian understandings, but Canada has risen to the challenge and undertaken research to answer its own questions about what constitutes high quality.

Historically, child-care has been an invisible sector in the Canadian economy. Today, child-care is emerging as a more visible and vital sector in the country's human service and education workforce. Thirty or forty years ago, the vast majority of child-care, for those in their early years, was provided in the home or by the extended family. While neighbours and nannies provided some care and there were a few day nurseries and nursery schools, paid care provided by non-relatives was unusual rather than typical. Now, most preschool children use some type of regular paid child-care (Beach, Bertrand & Cleveland, 1998).

Canadian Research and Development Initiatives

For those advocating for increased supports for families, and care and early education for their children, there have been some exciting research projects underway, or coming to fruition in Canada. During the winter of 1994-95, the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth found that 32 percent of children eleven or under - 1.5 million children - were in some form of parental care while their parents worked or studied. Another million children had been in child-care at some earlier point in their lives. This means that a little more than half of all Canadian children experience some form of child care some time in their lives. Despite the enormous number of children who use the services and the impact these services have on them and their families, Canada does not have a national system of child-care. Provinces and Territories are responsible for regulating child care services, developing child-care policies, and establishing the terms of licensing and monitoring.

The National Children's Agenda, is a cooperative venture prompted by the Federal-Provincial-Municipal Council on Social Renewal. It is hoped that this will lead to a more

carefully orchestrated approach to meeting the needs of children and families through a multi-faceted approach that relies on shared responsibilities. The intention is to define these needs, meet them and find ways of measuring progress. The National Children's Agenda has encouraged input from all stakeholders along with businesses and communities, in addition to the three levels of government.

'Our Child Care Workforce' is more than a cry for better pay for child-care workers. This research-led document comes from the Child Care Human Resources Steering Committee and recommends accessibility, training, research and quality along with recognition and remuneration for staff.

'Reversing the Real Brain Drain: Early Years Study' was published in April 1999 (McCain & Mustard 1999) as a result of research undertaken by The Canadian Institute for Advanced Research. This was a document that underscored the need to pay attention to neuroscience in the early development of young children. The authors built a convincing case for providing support for families so that this early development can flourish. Although the push was to increase the possibilities for children to reach their potential, education efforts were directed to quality parent support, rather than child care and education provision, in the group care sense.

Annual reports of 'The Progress of Canada's Children' provide a significant insight into the social issues connected with quality care and education. This report is generated by the Canadian Council on Social Development and represents a meta-analysis of Canadian research undertaken by a variety of agencies including Human Resources Development Canada, Statistics Canada and respected research institutions.

Research in the United States by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), especially that focussing on Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) has been examined by Canadian educators and found to be applicable, to some extent. Concern has been expressed about the cultural limitations of its concepts in

relation to Canadian practice. However, DAP has been a widely accepted contribution to what constitutes quality.

Doherty-Derkowski (1995) offers an excellent review of Canadian and other research projects concerned with quality in early childhood programs. She makes a clear case for the necessity for determining the specific components of quality, and their importance in guiding policies and program delivery. Drawing from Canadian research she sheds light on the consequences of poor quality care and highlights the fact that, no matter how enriched, the child's home is unable to compensate for poor quality care.

The range of programs

All provinces and territories have a mix of commercial and non-profit child-care offering a range of choices for parents. For example, Ontario is a Province with a wide range of different programs: private centres, religious-based centres, philosophical-based centres such as Montessori and Waldorf, lab schools associated with colleges and universities, YMCA programmes, nanny services, drop-in centres, nursery schools, 'before and after' school care, home child care and informal care. Many centres offer special programmes such as early intervention, Healthy Babies, the integration of special needs children, multi-age grouping and parent resource programmes. Ontario has 3,200 child-care centres, which care for approximately 137,000 children on a full time basis. This includes 2,640 non-profit and 540 private child-care centres. There are approximately 8,300 home-based child-care facilities which serve another 19,200 children.

The smaller and more spread-out populations of some of the other Provinces and Territories have a much lower number of children in need of care and education. The types of care on offer reflect the local demand, but the need for it is rarely completely satisfied. Funding for programs, the subsidies available to parents, the qualifications required to offer care and education and the legislation governing its delivery vary considerably from one Province or Territory to another. Agreement about indicators of high quality has been

overshadowed by the call for the existence of child-care and education. Issues of affordability and accessibility have taken precedence over quality.

In 1994, the National Forum on Child Care, which included representatives from all parts of the child care community, crafted a set of guiding principles for high quality care in Canada. These guiding principles based on shared values, quality, affordability, availability, accessibility and accountability provide a common foundation for building a strong child-care sector.

Quebec's New Family Policy

In the province of Quebec major changes are currently underway in child-care and other family policy areas. In 1997 the government introduced an innovative family policy that integrated family benefits, paid parental leave, child care and kindergarten. Universally available, affordable child care, modelled on principles and policy developed in progressive European countries, is being phased in until every preschool child in Quebec is able to access child care for $5 a day, and less if their families have low incomes. The $5-a-day contribution entitles children to a maximum of ten hours a day of child-care, one meal and two snacks, and all of the educational materials the children use at child-care. The new child -programs, 'Centres de la petite enfance', will be community based, not-for profit, and parent controlled. All existing child care centres and the new centres will be expected to deliver both centre-based and family day care services. The centres will also offer other child-care and family support services such as weekend and evening care, part-time child care services, respite care etc. Another important aspect of the changes being brought forward is that school boards will be required to offer full day kindergarten to 5 year olds and to provide after school child care programs.

Multi-Age Practice

The Ryerson Multi-Age Early Childhood Education study (Phase One) was conducted between April 1996 and March 1999 to provide an overall understanding of how multi-age grouping models can be used in group, licensed, early childhood settings in

Canada to meet the needs of children, families and caregivers. The term 'multi-age groupings' is used in a particular way, to refer to the placement of children of different ages together in activity and learning areas for substantial portions of the daily schedule. In particular the study focused on the inclusion of infants and toddlers with preschool children in licensed child-care centres across Canada (Bernhard et. al. 1999).

Recently, there has been an increase of multi-age programs in Canada, and there are calls for further usage of the concept. In the last 15 years, changes in cultural and ethnic diversity of the population, along with a move toward increased economic efficiency have resulted in reopening questions of quality of care and optimal grouping models for young children. Advocates for effective education with diverse populations have become involved in promoting multi-age settings because they are thought to be congenial to family atmosphere and language and cultural preservation. The issues have also arisen in relation to children with disabilities. Although teachers continue to need support and education, the inclusion of children of diverse ability levels is facilitated by multi-age groupings. In aboriginal populations, the notion of age-segregation for young children is problematic and can interfere with cultural teachings. Multi-age groupings fit naturally with traditional aboriginal child rearing patterns. In certain European countries such as Denmark, Netherlands, and Sweden, the move toward multi-age groupings has evolved as part of a growing effort to meet the needs of children and families and to promote interactions between children that stress the values of non-aggression, co-operation, and a sense of social responsibility (Bernhard et. al. In press).

The Ryerson study was designed to present an informed view of evolving multi-age practices in child-care centres in Canada. Decisions regarding multi-age groupings are being considered in the context of maintaining the significant gains that have been made in the last decade to ensure that child care standards are elevated so as to enable the provision of quality child-care. Phase Two of the project, developing modules for the training of Early Childhood Education (ECE) personnel who are involved with the inclusion of infants and

toddlers in multi-age settings, is now underway. Preliminary findings suggest training in the areas of community building, professionalism, planning and programming for diverse age groupings and understanding development from a cultural-contextual perspective, is needed.

The YMCA Family Development Centre

A Family Development Centre, as created by the YMCA of Greater Toronto, is a place of education, safety and nurturance for each member of each family who participates. The Centre combines child-care with drop in facilities, a toy library, infant massage, creative programs, library and print materials for children and adults, nursery school, kindergarten, school-age activities, camp, health education, dance sessions, group discussions, speech therapy, early intervention, parenting workshops, places for relaxation and togetherness, community-building activities, laundry facilities, father and child activities, meals and snacks and spaces to ëhang outí. The program delivery alters according to the family and community needs, the resources available and the talents of the staff, parents and volunteers who collaborate.

Quality of practice is based on the principles of philanthropic commitment to children, families and community. Here the practice is based on well-researched indicators of quality for childrenís programs along with learning that has been generated through experience working with families in the local community. The Family Development Centre was created as a response to community need with the financial support of the YMCA and its members and supporters, community partners and donations from corporate sponsors. An advisory group made up of experts in the field along with parents and volunteers has helped to drive the initiative and assist it come to fruition. The notion was to create a place of exemplary practice that genuinely met the changing needs of its participants, rather than provide a rigid program construct to which the community was expected to comply. Evolving with changing needs was a central issue in the development stage; the design needed to be adaptable as well as responsive. Other core requirements were affordability, aesthetically pleasing environments, appropriate programming for each individual,

stimulation balanced with comfort, well qualified and competent staff, on-going training and development and a profound respect for the diverse groups of people for whom the centre was to serve.

Despite some initial start-up challenges, and inevitable budget constraints, the Family Development Centre has attracted families who are extremely positive about the services that they can access. Growth in membership needs to be addressed, though. Marketing is challenged because of transient populations, those whose English is a second language and families who might not typically be drawn to community resources.

The curriculum for the centre's child care and other programs including camp focuses on play with a discovery and adventure-based approach that is child initiated and adult facilitated. Principles of Practice have been articulated that help shape all elements of the childrenís programs. These include: play based discovery learning, family participation, low ratios/small groups, appropriate practice, exceptional staff, relationship-based programs and positive environments.

The measures of success for the Family Development Centre include: parent satisfaction, the developmental progress of the children, positive effects of interventions, retention of membership, attendance levels, volunteer hours and fiscal accountability. Some of these are challenging to determine. The YMCA uses a variety of methods to research the success of its outcomes, including surveys, participant stories, budgets, staff observation and documentation, attendance logs, and the YMCA annual report.

Conclusions

The Quebec Centres de la petite enfance, the Ryerson multi-age groupings model and the YMCA Family Development Centre show differing elements of high quality child care and education. The Quebec policy demonstrates a Provincial commitment to the accessibility of quality care, the Ryerson multi-age project exemplifies a practice that increases the quality of care and education by re-structuring the childís experience and the creation of the YMCA Family Development Centre shows how a community can meet the needs of its families by

offering parents what they want and need in a flexible manner. All three components of Canadian practice indicate a research-based approach to ensuring that the concepts of quality are evolving. The research into child care over the last two decades has focussed primarily on two questions related to high quality child care. The first concerns the determinants of high quality care and the second concerns the effects on child development in both the short and long term of child care of differing levels of quality. Staff/caregivers are the most critical factor that determines the quality of child-care. Caregivers are the child-care. High quality child care should promote sensitive, responsive interactions between children and caregivers that are frequent, individual, personal, and developmentally appropriate. High quality care is consistently shown in a number of widely reported studies to be associated with the following characteristics:

- High adult to child ratios
- Stable, consistent care-giving
- Small group sizes
- Staff/care-givers well trained in early childhood education
- Adequate health, safety and physical environment precautions
- Decent wages and working conditions
- Support and resources
- Good workplace morale
- Applied research is pointing to some further components of quality child-care and education that might be added to the accepted profile:
- Flexible delivery
- Appropriate practice
- Programming based on brain research
- Family/parent support
- Family participation
- Culturally sensitive programming

- Links to/from the community

Canadian research shows that while high quality child-care positively influences children's development and learning, poor quality care is shown to have negative effects on children regardless of class or status. The effects of both high and poor quality child- care may be long-lasting. Therefore quality in child-care matters very much for children, their parents our communities, and, perhaps most importantly, for our society as a whole. Research and policy analysts in economics, health and medicine, education and human rights, working with various perspectives, have joined more traditional advocates in feminist, social justice and trade union circles to support the idea that early childhood education is essential for optimal healthy development and that good quality child-care is an issue of national importance for Canadians (Friendly in Cleveland & Krashinsky, forthcoming).

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